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INDEPENDENT PALESTINIAN UNIONS ESTABLISH NEW COALITION IN DRIVE FOR WORKER DEMOCRACY, JULY 31, 2007

July 31, 2007, Ramallah: In an effort to give Palestinian workers more bargaining power and bring more democracy to the Palestinian labor movement, 13 Palestinian trade unions and workers committees have established a new independent labor coalition.

The move, which poses a challenge to the highly politicized mainstream Palestinian unions, came on Saturday after a two-day conference in Ramallah organized by the Democracy and Workers' Rights Center (DWRC). The 13 independent unions cover important sectors of Palestinian society and represent more than 50,000 workers.

The meeting adopted a constitution and elected an executive committee of 15, including three women, which will meet again shortly in Ramallah.

Many Palestinian workers have long complained that the Palestinian General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU), which claims to represent more than 250,000 workers, does little on their behalf and is too closely allied with the Fatah political party. In addition, the PGFTU has been criticized for a lack of transparency and for not holding internal elections for years.

Hasan Barghouthi, DWRC General Director, told the opening session: "One of the main challenges for this coalition will be to learn from the history of union movement so that we don't repeat past mistakes. Until now, Palestinian labor federations have been largely controlled by political factions but with no influence on politics."

Independent workers have been active in exercising their rights throughout the intifada, and many feel that their commitment to bottom-up democracy will bolster any future Palestinian State. Among those attending were representatives from the Unemployed Workers' Federation.

Abdel Hakim Alayan, President of the Financial Sector Employee Association, agreed that "democracy is a basic component of a genuine union movement" and argued that the new coalition "will be the cornerstone of rebuilding civil society, which ultimately will contribute to the democratization of Palestinian society."

The election of three women to the Committee also reflects the coalition's strong commitment to democracy. Khoulood Asmar, from the Telecommunication Union, expressed elation at her election to the Committee: "As a woman (I) think differently from the men. I think women have a clearer vision than men. I know my aim and I go for it."

The attendance of Ahmad Tawfiq, Director of Labor Relations at the Palestinian Ministry of Labor, was viewed as a possible shift of policy by the new Palestinian government, in favor of

greater shopfloor democracy. Mr Tawfiq told the opening session: "The Ministry of Labor supports you. I know all of you and know that you are democratic and genuine professional and independent trade unions with leadership elected by the grassroots members."

In the past, international agencies and unions have been unsympathetic toward independent unions, which they view as a threat to the official PGFTU and the Fatah party. But this, too, may now be changing. After indicating that it was too busy to attend the conference, the International Labor Organization sent a representative. The UN Development Program also attended. DWRC hopes to promote the new coalition with European and American unions.

Eliza Bates from Columbia University, who is volunteering with DWRC this summer as a Peace Fellow of The Advocacy Project (AP), helped the DWRC team work with the media. Her DWRC colleague, Jumana Dabis, will continue to report on the evolution of the coalition.

The following 13 Palestinian unions participated: General Union of Electricity Sector Workers, Financial Sector Employees' Association, Local Authority Workers' Federation, Telecommunication and Information Technology Trade Union, Federation of University Professors and Employees Trade Unions, Federation of Higher Education College Workers, Association of Employees in Pharmaceutical Industries, Emergency Medical Service Union, Workers Committees in Private Hospitals, Palestinian Red Crescent Society Workers' Union in the Hebron area, Kindergarten and Private Schools Union, Workers' Committee for the Palestinian Farmers and Unemployed Workers Federation.

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